

You look at yourself in the mirror as you brush your hair. Same old, same old. An afternoon run, an afternoon shower, now your head's clear enough from work for you to go to the cafe. You dress, and get your bag ready. You're not a three-bag person. Not a bag lady. Just the laptop bag, with a library book in the side pouch.

You're one of the lucky ones in this hellscape wonderland. You can live without a car. You work in your apartment, on the Internet. You get out on the street, and float on, to your favorite cafe, the only cafe, the only possible cafe, Mitzi's.

WAITING FOR MARGOT

by James Banks

MITZI'S CAFE

Mitzi's is not a breakfast cafe, with bottles of ketchup on the table. Nor is it a vanity hangout. Mitzi's has been in the neighborhood and will never die. It's not the kind of place where you feel European. It has board games that people don't tend to play. The thing that makes it your favorite is that they don't play music.

How do cafes stay in business? Lowlifes like you sit there for hours on a single cup of tea. Apparently, they make all their money in the morning, when people get their coffee for work. But Mitzi's isn't open until 10 AM. You will never know how Mitzi's makes its money, and that has something to do with how it will never die.

The baristas at Mitzi's come and go, and you never got in the habit of befriending them anyway. You know their names but don't get too attached. Alicia rings you up and you get some rooibos tea.

Why do you come to the cafe? At the cafe that will never die, the Dice God rolls you a human every time. God speaks to you through this cafe. You take Communion at this cafe, and you will die in this cafe. Not too soon, though, first you will live here.

You've met people here from time to time, and they come and go, rolling in and out of your life. You are casual, in this wonderland hellscape city. You are never going to die, and every day you live in terror of death.

You sit down at your little table and get out your laptop and start to check the Internet.

JULIA: Beth, is that you?

You know your name. Beth.

YOU: Hello, Julia? Is that right?

JULIA: Beth, you know me. Um, what do we know each other from?

YOU: I'm not sure I know you, actually...

JULIA: No, I'm Julia alright.

YOU: Okay. Well, we must know each other from somewhere.

JULIA: Yeah. Huh... well, it'll come to us.

YOU: Are you sure we know each other?

JULIA: Your face looks familiar, and I know your name.

YOU: Yeah, same here. Okay. Well, what were we talking about?

JULIA: Um... probably about construction on Birmingham Street?

YOU: No, it was probably something more mundane than that.

JULIA: Look at how we're launching in! We have chemistry.

YOU: Yeah, I can feel subtext building up.

JULIA: Darn subtext! Okay. Okay. I don't like subtext either.

YOU: You've had bad experiences with it?

JULIA: Yeah. So what do you want to talk about?

YOU: You're weird, aren't you?

JULIA: Yes. Definitely. Are you weird?

YOU: I don't know. I don't know if I would fit in with weird people.

JULIA: What's that supposed to mean?

YOU: I don't know. There's too much subtext.

JULIA: We're going to have to do something about the subtext. Why don't we play a game of Scrabble?

YOU: Um, OK, sure.

JULIA: I'll go get it.

You're having that all-too-familiar feeling of reality bending and being perfectly normal at the same time. Fate strikes. It always strikes you. You are fate's victim.

Julia returns with the pristine Scrabble box.

You go first and write ASP on the board. She counters with PARIAH.

She's ten years younger than you. You can tell. Okay. A younger person. When you thought she was your age, at first, you didn't know what to think. You didn't know if you could handle someone that strong, that unhinged.

But if she's younger, you can put some distance on her. She's not a threat.

YOU: So what brings you to the old Hellscape?

JULIA: I'm an actress.

YOU: Yeah? How long have you been going for that?

JULIA: Since I was a kid. It's been my life's purpose.

YOU: That's interesting. How do you know it's your life's purpose?

JULIA: It's been the only thing I've been interested in since I was a kid. So clearly, it's my purpose. My purpose would have to be something that I wanted to do a lot.

YOU: That makes sense, assuming your life has a purpose.

JULIA: It absolutely does have a purpose. Your life has a purpose too. How old are you?

You never care who knows how close you are to the grave.

YOU: I'm 41.

JULIA: Oh wow, I'm 30!

YOU: You're too old to be that happy about it.

JULIA: No, I'm not, my life has purpose!

YOU: And your purpose is to be happy?

JULIA: No. Not at all. But I stay young.

You look around.

YOU: [conspiratorially] You know... sometimes I think that if you stay in this cafe your whole life, you'll never die.

JULIA: I don't believe it. Explain.

YOU: How long have you been coming here?

JULIA: I just came here on a whim and a whisper.

YOU: Okay, well I've been coming here for years. And sometimes, if I close my eyes, and listen through the sounds in the cafe, I can hear the heart of the cafe. And if you can hear the heart of something, you can hear the reality that it's in. And this cafe is not rooted in this world of change and wonder. No, this cafe is rooted in a changeless place.

JULIA: Changeless?

YOU: Not like how $2 + 2$ is always 4, or like how John Lennon was always assassinated by Mark David Chapman. A different kind of changeless. The changeless of... eternal life.

JULIA: Are you messing with me? Are you trying to creep me out? Because it's starting to work.

You're surprised by this. You shouldn't be after so many times, but you always are. You can't talk about the spiritual world without freaking people out.

YOU: No, no, no. Don't be creeped out. Look, you either see it or you don't. Forget I said it.

JULIA: No, I've recovered my composure. Okay. So what is eternal life like?

YOU: I don't know, I only see the edge of it.

JULIA: Okay, so it's a place where things are changeless. So I never grow old and die.

YOU: I don't know.

JULIA: But what do we do there?

YOU: I think if we stay in this cafe in order to get to eternal life, we end up doing whatever we're doing now, in eternal life.

JULIA: So we play Scrabble?

YOU: And we talk. That's what Mitzi's Cafe is all about. Other cafes come and go. The Warren used to be down the street. But the decor inside wasn't well-executed, and it went under. It was a nice cafe, but ultimately Mitzi's is where we all went.

JULIA: We all? You have a pack of friends?

YOU: They're not really friends. They're not enemies. They're just people. They're my people. Cafe people.

JULIA: Oh, I know all about cafe people...

YOU: Yeah?

JULIA: I used to go to cafes when I was in college. There was always that weirdo.

YOU: Did you ever talk to anyone at the cafe back then?

JULIA: Just my friends, studying.

YOU: What you learn when you talk to people at cafes is that the people you would never talk to are weird, but they don't register very deeply with you because you don't talk to them. But it's the normal people at the cafe that are really weird, to you.

JULIA: Okay, yeah, that makes sense. Reality is what you feel, not what's out there.

YOU: Somehow that's true. That's something I'm still learning.

JULIA: Do you believe in friendship?

YOU: What do you mean by that?

JULIA: I mean, can two people really be friends? I mean, really. Not just saying they are, but actually being there for each other.

YOU: I think so.

JULIA: Have you ever been friends with anyone?

YOU: Yeah...

JULIA: You don't sound convinced...

YOU: There have certainly been people I thought of as friends, and they thought of me as a friend...

JULIA: And you treated each other as friends, yeah, I know! I know all about that! But were you really friends?

YOU: Wow, I don't know, now that you say that... I don't really know...

You think about the Usual Suspects, your List of people from your past. Was he a friend? Or was it

all a romantic game? Was she a friend? Or did she just want you for conversations and advice? What about Brian? Was Brian your friend? He would go on and on about I-You as opposed to I-It and it was exactly the kind of thing that gets at this question right? He was a nice guy. Brian... what happened to Brian?

JULIA: [looking you right in the eye] Beth. Listen to me. You're going to find a real friend someday.

YOU: Julia, I want to believe you.

JULIA: You're going to have to trust the universe.

The door opens, the jingle bells ring, Mitzi's has absorbed another globule into the interior of its cell.

It's Brian.

Brian goes straight to the counter, as he always does, assiduous to get his drink before he sits down. On one occasion, it was a crowded day and he got his drink and then found there was nowhere to sit. There wasn't even room at your table because it was finals and you were sharing with some college students. So he stood next to you with his "For here" mug in his hands and talked and tried to drink his tea fast, but after he burned his tongue he had to wait, standing there with his fat backpack pulling on him, getting in people's way as they walked in and out, feeling embarrassed but committed to his mug and to talking to you, getting his money's worth.

Brian goes straight to the counter and orders some peppermint tea. He talks with Alicia as he pays, then gets his tea and goes over to your table.

YOU: Brian, it's been a long time. I was just thinking of you.

BRIAN: Hey, Beth, hey, who's this?

JULIA: Julia.

BRIAN: Hey Julia, you have a very pretty face.

JULIA: Thanks! I got some cosmetic surgery done. Can you tell?

BRIAN: Now that you mention it, I kind of can. Very nice.

JULIA: When you complimented my face, were you flirting with me? I'm not good with subtext.

BRIAN: Me neither! Um, I don't know, I'm kind of celibate.

JULIA: What does that mean? Like you don't have sex?

BRIAN: No, it's not about that...

JULIA: You have sex but you don't date people?

BRIAN: No, it's not that exactly either...

JULIA: What is celibacy? Break it down to me. I'm a movie person. If you were to make a movie of it, how would you do that?

BRIAN: Um, well, so, the thing is...

JULIA: Is it a dirty thing? How is it dirty?

BRIAN: Well, no, the thing is that... Okay, so you know how in a romantic comedy, you can show the couple flirting, and then getting involved and then having a fight, and then... they can kiss! You can put the kiss onscreen and that's the relationship. Well... with celibacy it's different. Let's say you have a movie about a monk. You could show the monk cleaning the floor of the monastery, and you could show a few seconds of him

praying, before the audience got bored. You could show him chanting Psalms with the other brothers. Let's say he's not a monk, but he's a social reformer.

JULIA: You can do that? Just change him into a social reformer?

BRIAN: Deep down, it's the same man, the same celibacy.

JULIA: Okay, I see that.

BRIAN: So if he's a social reformer, you can see him protesting and writing letters to people in Congress. And if he becomes governor, you can show him giving an acceptance speech. You can show all that. But in either version of this guy's life, can you show his celibacy? What would you show?

JULIA: So celibacy is emptiness?

BRIAN: But it's not really emptiness...

JULIA: Then what is it? Are you happy?

BRIAN: Yes, I think overall I'm happy.

JULIA: But with your celibacy, are you happy with your celibacy?

BRIAN: Well...

JULIA: Well, what? I don't think you're happy. I think I just figured you out.

You listen to the fate of this exchange, and feel yourself coming in by instinct.

YOU: Julia, please don't figure him out. Don't ever figure him out.

JULIA: Sorry, Beth. It's Beth, right?

BRIAN: Do you two know each other?

YOU: We do now.

BRIAN: OK.

YOU: So what brings you to Mitzi's, Brian? It's been a long time.

BRIAN: Well, the last time I was here was six months ago.

YOU: Yeah, and you haven't been here since. What happened?

BRIAN: Margot and I had a falling out.

YOU: Really? I saw her here a few months ago and she didn't say anything about it.

BRIAN: So she's been here since?

YOU: Not very often.

BRIAN: Okay, well I was hoping to see her here again.

YOU: Yeah, she might show up. I'll be here.

JULIA: Who was Margot?

BRIAN: Someone we both knew.

YOU: Brian knew her better than I did.

BRIAN: I don't know, she was kind of weird.

JULIA: Beth and I were just having a conversation about that, about how everyone's weird and everyone's living forever.

BRIAN: She was weird, but only around the outside. In the middle she was like clear water. A clear stream, flowing down a mountain.

YOU: Yeah, that sounds right.

JULIA: Okay, so what I understand is the universe. I don't understand what you guys are talking about.

BRIAN: It's not like you have to understand it. The way I look at it is, you pay attention to someone enough, your mind puts together a picture of them. I paid a lot of attention to Margot. So I kind of saw who she really was. I could see things about her that she couldn't see, because she was so busy talking to me or to whoever else she was talking about. What I see in her is just a picture.

JULIA: Beth, let me understand this: You said that Mitzi's heart is in eternity and in eternity, things never change, right? I never get old. If I never leave this cafe, I never die, right? All that is things you said, correct?

YOU: Yes, that's right.

JULIA: So is Margot a stream of water with weirdness around the outside? If I meet her, am I going to be thinking, "stream of water in there"?

YOU: Yes, she is a stream of water. That's what she really is. She looks like a woman, and she acts like a human being, but her true nature is to be a pure and clear stream running down a mountain, in the unchangeable world.

JULIA: So if she stayed here in Mitzi's forever, she would turn into a stream of water?

YOU: Yes.

JULIA: Brian, what do you think? Is that true? Would she turn

into a stream of water?

BRIAN: Um... no, I think that's just a perception of her, I mean, I'd like to think so. It's like, the idea of her turning into a stream of water is beautiful, so I want it to be true.

YOU: It is true.

BRIAN: How would it be true?

YOU: We don't belong to the world of the truth, except, there's part of us that does. It's like, if you're looking for what is most trustworthy, if you keep looking, you find that spiritual vision is the most trustworthy. That's reality, what you see with spiritual eyes.

BRIAN: Okay, I hadn't heard you put it that way before.

JULIA: So if we stay in Mitzi's do I live unchanging forever?

YOU: No, you die, except, there's a part of you that lives on.

JULIA: The part of me with spiritual eyes?

YOU: Maybe so, that would make sense. But it might be more the part of you that your spiritual eyes see.

JULIA: Okay, when my spiritual eyes see something, *I* see it, right?

YOU: Yes...

JULIA: Then that *I* has to last forever?

YOU: I guess so...

BRIAN: Haha, it's funny, but I've never seen anyone die in Mitzi's. You may be right, Beth.

JULIA: So Brian, you're here to wait for Margot, then?

BRIAN: Yeah, but I have other reasons to be here, too. This is a good place to get work done. And it's nice to meet people.

JULIA: Brian, I'm an actress. So I know a thing or two about theater. Have you ever heard of the play *Waiting for Godot*?

BRIAN: No, what's it about?

JULIA: Don't read it, it'll depress you.

BRIAN: No, tell me what it's about. I need to know the truth, even if it kills me.

JULIA: You're never going to see Margot again, Brian. That's what the play's about. It's about how you're never going to see her again.

BRIAN: I don't think that truth would kill me... even if it were true. I don't know if it's true or not.

JULIA: So you're going to keep going? One step at a time?

BRIAN: One step at a time.

JULIA: You're never going to see Margot again, Brian.

YOU: She may come, and she may not. That's in the land of fact. But, Brian, Julia has a point. After a while, you might have to forget about her.

BRIAN: Yeah I was thinking about something like that...

YOU: You might have to quit going to Mitzi's...

BRIAN: Yeah, I could see that...

YOU: You might have to leave the Hellscape entirely, go to a

new city...

BRIAN: Is it possible to get distance on the past? Mark David Chapman will always assassinate John Lennon in 1980, and the *Titanic* sinks every April, marks every calendar from here to eternity.

YOU: Brian, you have to live for your own life.

BRIAN: What if my life is endurance?

YOU: You mean, your inner nature is to wear your overstuffed backpack and trudge forever?

BRIAN: Yes. Is that my inner life?

YOU: I don't want to say either way.

JULIA: It is, isn't it?

YOU: You can't let yourself be deceived by the truth, Julia. That's the most insidious kind of deception.

JULIA: Let's play Scrabble. I want to escape from the truth.

BRIAN: Can I join you in your game of words?

YOU: Yes. Get some letters.

You play Scrabble with the cafe people, Brian and Julia.

The sun beats down and a dust storm comes through the street outside for 30 minutes. In these days, there is no longer enough water to keep the farmland at the edge of the Wondrous Hellscape irrigated, so dust blows in when the adiabatic winds come down the northern valley. It's no condition under which to go outside, but it's over before your game is.

Brian then has books to read, and Julia has somewhere else to be. You sit with your laptop, using the wifi, checking the Internet idly, following links and reading articles.

[Closing theme.]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 1 "Pilot"

Written 3 February 2019

Released 3 February 2023

COMMENTS

1. There is a piece of folk art that depicts the Titanic, with each anniversary of its sinking written down on the page, stretching for decades. (Or even centuries? I saw the art a while ago in the Mingei Museum.)

© 2023 by James Banks, licensed CC BY-NC 4.0 (see creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)